

Section 1

#1: Opening Hook "The puppet moved. Not swung from a string — moved. Its head jerked toward me, joints creaking like bones."

Strengths:

- Your opening immediately grabs attention by showing something strange happening rather than just telling us about it
- The short, punchy sentences create tension and make us want to keep reading

Vague Time Reference → Your phrase "I'd been his apprentice for four weeks" tells us how long the narrator has worked there, but this detail doesn't add much meaning to the story. Instead of just stating a time period, you could show us what the narrator has learnt or experienced during those weeks. For example, you might write something like: *"I'd watched Master Olivetti carve dozens of puppets, each one staying perfectly still — until tonight."* This version connects the time to the story's main event and builds more suspense.

Exemplar: *"I'd spent countless nights in this workshop, watching Master Olivetti's hands breathe life into lifeless wood — but the puppets had always remained still."*

#2: Sensory Description "The workshop flickered with lamplight. Dozens of marionettes hung from beams, faces pale and still. The air smelled of varnish and dust — and something faintly human, like sweat."

Strengths:

- Your sensory details help us picture and smell the workshop clearly
- The comparison "something faintly human, like sweat" creates an uncomfortable feeling that fits the spooky mood

Underdeveloped Setting → Whilst your descriptions paint a basic picture of the workshop, you could deepen the atmosphere by showing us more specific details about what makes this place unique or unsettling. The phrases "flickered with lamplight" and "hung from beams" are clear but quite

general. You might describe the particular way the shadows move across the puppet faces, or mention specific tools Master Olivetti uses. For instance: *"Lamplight cast dancing shadows across the marionettes' hollow eyes, whilst carving knives gleamed on the workbench like sharpened teeth."* This adds personality to your setting and makes it more memorable.

Exemplar: *"In the lamplight, shadows crawled across the workshop walls, and the marionettes' painted eyes seemed to follow my every movement, their strings tangling like spiderwebs overhead."*

#3: Dialogue and Revelation "Each one," Olivetti said quietly, "remembers the hands that shaped it. Memory is heavier than oak."

Strengths:

- Master Olivetti's mysterious statement makes us curious about how puppets could possibly remember things
- The metaphor comparing memory to weight is interesting and thought-provoking

Unexplored Concept → Your line about memory being "heavier than oak" is intriguing, but you don't develop this idea further in your story. What does it actually mean for a puppet to remember? How does this memory make them move? These questions are raised but left hanging. You could strengthen your piece by adding a sentence or two that hints at the answer. Perhaps Master Olivetti could gesture to a particular puppet and share a brief detail about its creation, showing us rather than just telling us about this strange memory. For example: *"Each one," Olivetti said quietly, "carries the echo of its maker's touch. See that one?" He pointed to a dancer with a cracked smile. "It still moves the way my daughter danced, though she's been gone twenty years."* This grounds the mysterious idea in something concrete and emotional.

Exemplar: *"Each marionette absorbs a piece of whoever carved it," Olivetti whispered, running his finger along a puppet's cheek. "This one remembers my sister's laughter, trapped in the grain of the wood forever."*

■ Your piece creates a genuinely creepy atmosphere and pulls readers in with an interesting mystery about living puppets. The biggest area where you can improve is in developing the ideas you introduce. You raise fascinating questions — like how puppets can remember or why they wake up — but you don't explore them deeply enough. Additionally, your middle paragraphs could show us more about

the relationship between the narrator and Master Olivetti. What has their apprenticeship been like? Does the narrator trust him? Building this relationship would make the ending more powerful. Also, consider expanding the moment when the puppet says the narrator's name. This is shocking, but it happens quite quickly. You could slow down this moment and show us exactly how the narrator feels — perhaps their hands go cold, or their legs feel frozen. Finally, your ending feels a bit rushed. The line "shadows breathing in unison" is poetic, but what happens next? Does the narrator stay or run? Adding just a few more sentences would give your story a more satisfying conclusion whilst keeping the spooky, uncertain feeling you've created.

Overall Score: 40/50

Section 2:

#1 "The puppet moved. Not swung from a string — moved. Its head jerked towards me, joints creaking like bones. Master Olivetti didn't startle. He adjusted his spectacles, muttering, "Ah. The elm one always wakes first."

#2 ~~I'd been his apprentice for four weeks, long enough to know wood doesn't breathe.~~ [I'd spent weeks watching Master Olivetti carve silent puppets, long enough to know wood doesn't breathe.] It creaks, it cracks — it doesn't exhale. My voice stuck in my throat, but Olivetti lifted a finger, silencing me.

"Watch," he commanded.

#3 The workshop flickered with lamplight. Dozens of marionettes hung from beams, faces pale and still. The air smelt of varnish and dust — and something faintly human, like sweat. A puppet's eyelid twitched. Another's hand flexed, the string trembling as if tugged from beneath the floor.

"Each one," Olivetti said quietly, "remembers the hands that shaped it. Memory is heavier than oak."

I stumbled backward, heart thudding faster than the ticking of the clock on the wall. The puppet's mouth opened. A dry whisper escaped — my name.

Olivetti smiled, calm as ever. "Your first lesson," he said, "is that some art refuses to stay still."

I didn't move. The puppets swayed gently above us, shadows breathing in unison.

Section 1

#1: "I knew the package wasn't for me the moment I saw the handwriting — looping, too cheerful, like the kind you find in thank-you notes from strangers."

Strengths:

- Your opening sentence immediately creates mystery and makes readers want to know more about the package
- The comparison to "thank-you notes from strangers" helps readers picture exactly what the handwriting looked like

Weakness: Underdeveloped emotional connection → While your opening grabs attention, you move quite quickly past Eli's feelings about receiving something unexpected after his mother's death. When you write "I knew the package wasn't for me," you create an interesting puzzle, but you don't let readers sit with Eli's confusion or worry about who sent it. Adding one or two more sentences about what Eli thought or felt when he first saw the package would help readers connect more deeply with his experience. For example, did his heart beat faster? Did he feel scared or curious?

Exemplar: *I knew the package wasn't for me the moment I saw the handwriting — looping, too cheerful, like the kind you find in thank-you notes from strangers. My stomach tightened. Who would send something here, to our house, six months after everything had changed?*

#2: "The box sat on the bench for two days before I caved. My mother would have opened it immediately, slicing through tape like a surgeon, eager to uncover the next discovery."

Strengths:

- The phrase "slicing through tape like a surgeon" creates a vivid picture of how careful and skilled his mother was
- Your comparison between Eli and his mother shows their different personalities effectively

Weakness: Rushed character reflection → Your writing moves from describing the unopened box to comparing Eli with his mother very quickly. The sentence "I was not my mother" feels a bit sudden and could be explored more thoughtfully. You're introducing an important idea — that Eli feels different from his mother and perhaps not as good as her — but you don't give readers enough time to understand why this matters to him. Does he feel guilty about being different? Is he sad about it? Expanding this moment would strengthen the emotional weight of your story.

Exemplar: *I was not my mother. Where she saw adventure, I saw risk. Where she found joy in the unknown, I found only the safety of what I could name and control.*

#3: "I traced each petal with trembling fingers. She had drawn a map, not of roads but of roots. My mother saw wonder where I saw order. I inherited her eyes, but not her courage to look beyond the soil."

Strengths:

- The image of "trembling fingers" shows Eli's deep emotion without telling readers directly that he's upset
- Your final line about inheriting eyes but not courage is powerful and thought-provoking

Weakness: Unclear metaphor resolution → Your metaphor about "a map, not of roads but of roots" is beautiful, but it remains somewhat puzzling for readers. You introduce this idea of roots versus roads, but you don't quite help readers understand what this means for Eli's relationship with his mother or what he's learning. The jump from "map of roots" to "wonder versus order" to "eyes versus courage" presents three different ideas quite rapidly. Slowing down to connect these thoughts more clearly would help readers follow your meaning. What does seeing roots instead of roads actually mean? How does this connect to wonder and courage?

Exemplar: *She had drawn a map, not of roads but of roots — showing me that the most important connections grow beneath the surface, invisible but alive. My mother saw wonder where I saw order, miracles where I saw only facts.*

■ Your piece presents a touching story about grief and the differences between a son and his botanist mother. The core idea — that Eli receives pressed flowers with a note after his mother's death — is genuinely moving and gives you strong material to work with. However, your writing would benefit from slowing down in key emotional moments. You rush through Eli's feelings quite quickly, especially when he discovers the flowers and reads his mother's note. Think about the most important moments in your story: seeing the package, opening it, reading the note, and understanding what his mother wanted him to learn. Each of these moments deserves more space for readers to experience Eli's emotions fully. Additionally, your metaphors about maps, roots, wonder, and courage are poetic, but they need clearer connections between them. When you introduce an image like "a map of roots," help readers understand exactly what this means before moving to the next idea. Your first two paragraphs also spend considerable time on the unopened box — you might consider balancing this by giving equal attention to the actual discovery of the flowers and note. Finally, the ending introduces several big ideas (wonder versus order, eyes versus courage) in just two sentences, which makes the conclusion feel somewhat rushed after the careful build-up earlier.

Overall Score: 38/50

Section 2:

#1 I knew the package wasn't for me the moment I saw the handwriting — looping, too cheerful, like the kind you find in thank-you notes from strangers. My mother's was neat and measured, every letter a specimen pinned under glass. She'd been gone for six months. No one wrote like her anymore.

#2 The box sat on the bench for two days before I caved. My mother would have opened it immediately, slicing through tape like a surgeon, eager to uncover the next discovery. I was not my mother. I catalogued everything — even my own grief.

#3 Inside lay a bundle of pressed flowers, labelled in her hand: 'For Eli — things that refuse to die.' There were brittle violets, seaweed, and a dandelion puff, somehow still intact. Beneath them, a note: "This is the garden as I saw it — not the weeds, but the miracles."

I traced each petal with trembling fingers. She had drawn a map, not of roads but of roots. My mother saw wonder where I saw order. I inherited her eyes, but not her courage to look beyond the soil.